

**Thursday, September 14, 2006**

On September 11th, the President of the United States spoke to the nation:

"The American people have faced other grave crises in their history - with American courage, with American resolution they will do no less today."

The President was Franklin D. Roosevelt. On September 11th...1941.

I thought about that eerie coincidence on Saturday during a 9-11 ceremony at SUNY Farmingdale. I thought about the courage and resolution we witnessed five years ago, and continue to witness today.

One of the best examples sat right next to me: John Sferazo, a proud ironworker from Huntington Station.

So proud that when we were attacked, he rushed to Ground Zero. He knew he could use his skills as an ironworker to move debris in the search for survivors. John worked hard there, sucking in dangerous particulates in the air until his lungs were battered.

Today, his breathing is shallow and labored. It's difficult for him to finish a sentence without running out of air, without his chest heaving. His eyes are sad, but not defeated. His condition may have taken the breath out of him, but not his resolution.

Here's how I know.

Only days before we sat next to each other at the 9-11 ceremony in Farmingdale, John and I attended a different kind of 9-11 gathering in Washington. We met with the Secretary of Health and Human Services to ask why the funds Congress appropriated for medical monitoring and care for 9-11 recovery workers hadn't yet been released by the Administration. Senators Schumer and Clinton were there, along with a handful of Members of Congress from both parties.

It was a typical Washington meeting. Staffers lined the walls of the ornate Mansfield Room in the Capitol. Cameras flashed and questions were asked. I heard talk of "complexities" and "technicalities".

Typical -- until John Sferazo spoke. He rose to his feet, gulped as much air as he could, and told his story through those painfully short breaths, every word an effort.

"Mr. Secretary, no one told me I had to go to Ground Zero. My biggest problem was pushing through the police and soldiers who said it was too dangerous. But I'm trained. I knew I could help."

He spoke of the heroic recovery efforts, of experiences at the site that no human being should have to endure. And then he talked about the aftermath. How he began experiencing health problems, how his breathing changed, how his lungs deteriorated.

And how the governments' promises made to fund his medical monitoring and care had become as shallow as his own breaths.

Although his condition left him with a weakened voice and constricted sentences, his was the most powerful statement in the meeting that morning. When he finished, the room fell into a stunned silence (a rarity in Washington). One New Jersey Congressman wiped tears from his eyes.

Rep. Israel, Senator Clinton and other members of the NY Congressional delegation press Secretary Leavitt to on medical coverage for 9/11 recovery workers.

Secretary Leavitt then made a promise:  
\$75 million for medical care for 9-11 recovery workers would be released in October. Finally. And he would work with us to assess the additional funds necessary.

I leaned to Senator Clinton and whispered: "This is the third time I've heard that the check is in the mail."

There is usually a protocol for asking questions at meetings like this. You raise a hand, the Member chairing the meeting jots your name, and you are recognized in order. But I had become impatient.

"Mr. Secretary," I blurted, "I believe in taking yes for an answer. But I've heard two deadlines in this meeting. October 1st, and 'sometime in October.' Can we get your commitment in a written letter?"

He answered that "government doesn't move as fast as we would like" and there are "complexities" and "October is a bold goal" but that he would hold to it.

That may be. But if we were able to pass tax cuts for the richest oil company executives on earth at lightening speed, shouldn't we be able to make sure John Sferazo, an ironworker from Huntington Station, gets the funds he needs to treat lungs that were impaired during his heroic 9-11 recovery effort? Why is it so "complicated" to help him? Why has he had to wait...at all?

Which is why, as I sat next to John Sferazo at the 9-11 memorial in Farmingdale, I thought about FDR's quote from the same day 64 years ago.

Americans have always faced grave threat and crisis. And each generation has answered by

making the right choices and choosing the right priorities. Each generation has served and sacrificed, mobilized and manufactured, researched and developed, fought and fallen in the endless pursuit of threat.

We didn't let technicality and complexity stand in our way.

On this 9-11, I think about an early September 230 years ago -- right here on Long Island. George Washington and a ragtag group of fighters had been were hopelessly surrounded by the most powerful military machine on earth the British Navy. The concentration of warships and wooden masts was so great that New York Harbor was described as a forest. Our national survival seemed on the verge of extinction -- at the tender age of six weeks.

But Washington found the courage and commitment to escape the threat. And went on to replace foreign monarchy with American democracy.

This 9-11, I think about July 2nd...1863. When Col. Joshua Chamberlain and the 20th Maine stood atop Little Round Top in Gettysburg. They were miserably outnumbered and outgunned by the Confederate forces that surrounded them. But they knew they could not lose that hill. If they did, there would be nothing between Robert Lee's army...and Abraham Lincoln in the White House. After repeated assaults on their position, the 20th Maine ran out of ammunition, but not fortitude. They met the final assault this way: they fixed their bayonets and charged against an oncoming wave of men and munitions. And won. They saved the hill, and perhaps even the Union.

And I think of John Sferazo, who also responded to attack by charging forward, risking his very breath to help, charging past the police and soldiers who told him it was too dangerous.

Nothing is as important as the 9-11 memorials and ceremonies that embrace the memory of those we loved and lost. And they should also remind us that there are people in our midst today -- perhaps sitting next to us at those very ceremonies -- who have trouble breathing because they wouldn't take no for an answer.

They went to help, and we can still help them.

President Roosevelt was right on September 11, 1941. We have faced grave crises in our history. We have faced them with courage and resolution. And we can do no less today.

John Sferazo and so many like him -- ironworkers and steelworkers, cops and firefighters, laborers and paramedics -- showed courage and resolution for us.

We should no less for them. For John Sferazo.

Posted by: SI